When Ausma Zehanat Khan broke onto the scene in 2015 with *The Unquiet Dead*, she brought not only a fresh new voice to the mystery genre, but a much-needed breath of fresh air to Muslim characters in mainstream genre fiction.

In her books, Khan not only tackles issues of terrorism and Islamophobia, but also shows everyday Muslim men and women going about their lives and working to better their communities. In Khan's world — both fictional and real-life — Muslim men are charming, desirable love interests, and Muslim women are tough, headstrong feminists. Her non-Muslim characters are gifted with equal depth and dimension. She combines her outstanding cast with pulse-quickening mysteries that are based solidly in reality, yet she never lets the episodic elements of her novels overshadow the growth of her characters and the evolution of their relationships.

This month, Khan's back with the third book in her Esa Khattak and Rachel Getty mystery series, *Among the Ruins* (Minotaur), as well as a novella, *A Death in Sarajevo* (Minotaur), featuring the same beloved characters. We chatted with her about what it takes to craft mysteries so deeply influenced by real life, what it means to be bringing Muslim characters into the mainstream, and how she balances being an everyday Muslim with being asked to speak for all Muslims because of her place on the public stage.

Your first novel, *The Unquiet Dead*, was a favorite of RT reviewers and editors, and won our award for best first mystery novel — as well as tons of acclaim from other awards programs and reviewers. What was it like to have that kind of success with your first novel?

I can't thank you enough for all the support and encouragement! The response to *The Unquiet Dead* had such a fairy-tale quality to it. I couldn't quite believe it, and felt incredibly grateful and humbled. I also feel a deep sense of joy at having this book that means so much to me personally receive such a generous response.

Speaking of your first novel, what inspired you to start writing fiction in the first place?

My mother encouraged me to write from the time I was old enough to use a pencil. She knew I had stories bubbling up within me, probably because I was such a talkative kid. So now I have a treasure trove (or nightmare chest, depending on how you look at it) of short stories, plays, poems, and abandoned novels that have kept me company through the years. I started writing because I loved to read and because I knew I had stories I wanted to tell.

Your books are unique in that they feature not only a Muslim hero, in Detective Esa Khattak, but they show a world that a lot of us live in: one in which Muslims are part of our community. Obviously Khattak was an intentional character, but was

the ease with which the rest of the characters interact with him intentional?

I like to think it's a reflection of the life I know and the interactions I've seen. Until quite recently, it's simply been my experience. I've lived mainly in large, multicultural cities where members of different groups interact with each other in ways that are natural and mutually considerate — to the point where it's not something you think about. So writing Khattak's interactions that way seemed true to life.

In addition to having a Muslim hero in your books, you also often have Muslim and Middle Eastern "bad guys." While it's reality that every group will have its bad guys, did you ever consider not going down that road? Though it certainly adds to the complexity of the stories you tell, and the reality, is it difficult to write these characters knowing that some people will see it as confirmation of their bias?

This is probably the most difficult dilemma I face. I questioned myself a hundred times about *The Language of Secrets*, a book about a terror cell operating within a mosque. Did we really need another Muslim terrorist story — wasn't it just contributing to a climate of fear and hate? I had to work to make the story distinct in two ways: confronting anti-Muslim racism by creating a group of Muslim characters readers could identify with, particularly Esa Khattak and challenging our simplistic understanding of jihadism, as sprouting from a culture of nihilistic hate. It's a narrative that's completely without context and it's utterly dehumanizing — so I tried to walk that line where you educate through context and you don't deal in these reductive notions of who's wholly good or wholly evil, while ignoring the very real social and political conditions that have brought us to this moment. Finally, I think part of the problem is that terrorism is all we see when it comes to cultural expressions about Muslims; it's the only story there is. In my books, I speak back to that by uncovering the beauty and richness of the Islamic civilization. In *The Unquiet Dead*, I discuss the pinnacle of creative and religious symbiosis that was Andalusia; in *Secrets*, I share poetic traditions at the crossroads of the Muslim world. And in *Among the Ruins*, I describe Iran's cultural and architectural brilliance.

It's a difficult time to be self-critical, but for my books to have any value, they do need to confront our current reality head-on. So I couldn't write about Iran's beauty without discussing its egregious human rights situation. I try to find the balance, and not to reduce complex realities to a binary of good versus evil, or Us versus Them. I won't say that it's easy or that I'm always as successful as I'd like to be, but with each book, I try to create worlds that are real and that ring with an inner truth.

Your heroine is a young detective, Rachel Getty, who's got a complex background and very little experience, but who learns quickly and is incredibly loyal to her boss, Khattak. What drew you to writing Rachel? Was she inspired by any real-life person, or people? And do you see any of yourself in the character?

I see more of my sister Ayesha than myself in Rachel. My sister is this utterly competent, matter-of-fact, incredibly compassionate person, and I was thinking of her a great deal in shaping Rachel's character. If I get a flat tire, I'm likely to pull over in a panic, call my husband or cry. My sister would fix the flat herself, give a boost to any other broken-down car in the vicinity, while at the same time, she'd be sorting out a kid crisis on the phone and taking her dog to the vet. That's how I see Rachel. She's a problem-solver who has an enormous amount of compassion for everyone except herself. Rachel has the faults we all have: she says too much, she feels too much, she is always on the verge of a faux paus, she doubts herself — but then she's so much braver than she gives herself credit for. I love writing Rachel — I feel most at ease with her, whereas Khattak makes me work for every word.

We've seen a lot of growth for Rachel over the course of the series so far, both in her abilities as a detective and her personal growth. Where do you see her going in the future?

I see Rachel becoming increasingly confident as a detective and as a woman. She may be offered a promotion and then have to decide whether she wants to stay with Khattak or strike out on her own. And we're going to see some developments in her family relationships in upcoming books. Rachel is also finally going to have some romance in her life, though not without those moments of awkwardness that come so naturally to her.

Rachel, for all her troubles, is an incredibly strong woman. You're a self-described feminist, so how important was it to you to have a strong female in a lead role in your novels?

Very important. Law enforcement is a traditionally male career, and I have worked in all-male environments where you have to struggle for your perspective and concerns to be heard. I wanted to showcase Rachel's talents while also showing what she's up against. Rachel is this kind, caring person with a great deal of intuitive strength, despite her brusque exterior. I write her as someone who can build valuable relationships, but who is also self-reliant. I see both those things as strengths. And I have a lot of nieces, so it's important to me to write role models for them.

Khattak is a rare character in that he's a South Asian and Muslim man who also happens to be lusted after by pretty much every female character (at least to a degree). It's so unusual, unfortunately, for a man like Khattak to be presented as the love interest. So this question is two-fold. One: What is it like to break that trend and create such an attractive Muslim leading man? And two: He's so clearly attractive and charming; have you heard from readers about their own crushes on him yet?

Ha! Too much? I have a weakness for handsome, brooding detectives, so it was a lot of fun to write Esa Khattak as this drop-dead-gorgeous, emotionally reserved individual who provokes a reaction from everyone he meets. All my friends have crushes on him,

and many of my readers ask me to move his love life along and make him a little less strait-laced. I've been wanting to do that with Esa: ruffle his feathers, take the power his physical attractiveness gives him right out of his hands, to wake him up a bit. He's quite cerebral, so I'd like to make him a little more hot-blooded. That moment is coming in the fourth book in the series.

As a romance magazine writer, I have to ask: Does your husband ever get jealous of how desirable Khattak is? And are any of Khattak's character traits based on your husband?

I love this question! To answer it simply, no. My husband is a professor of Middle East studies — he's a brainy political activist, so it would never occur to him to be jealous of anyone while he's busy saving the world. Of course, I find my husband incredibly sexy and handsome, but the trait of my husband's that I gave Khattak is his courageous, compassionate heart. All his activism is rooted in it.

Among the Ruins **explores more of the Middle East by taking Khattak and Rachel out of Canada and into Iran. Within the book, you mention a number of real activists and explore real issues facing the country. What made you want to tackle this particular story?**

A number of different reasons. My husband is of Iranian background, so I've been immersed in Iranian culture for nearly two decades, and I love its sophistication, its beauty and its warmth. My parents also introduced me to Persian poetry at quite a young age; I couldn't understand it, but the reverence with which they recited it stayed with me. I wanted to bring out that beauty and courtliness in *Among the Ruins,* because I think that's something many people don't think of when they think of Iran. But my main reason for wanting to write on Iran is that is my husband is a strong supporter of the Green Movement, the dissident democratic movement that I explore in detail in the book. As a political activist and an outspoken critic of the regime, he isn't able to return to Iran, and many of his friends and colleagues have been jailed by the regime in the past. So we were deeply inspired by the rise of the Greens: it was a moment of hope for the Iranian people, a chance to realize their aspirations for freedom and democracy. This story is very personal to my Iranian family, so I wanted to explore these themes: loss, loneliness, exile, the personal cost exacted by authoritarianism, and the hope of self-determination that can never be crushed, no matter how tyrannical the forces that work in opposition to it.

Iran is a very controversial topic these days. What was it like tackling such a complex and controversial subject while also having to balance it with the growth and lightness of your characters?

It's balance I have to strike in all my books, and it can be tricky. No matter how dark or despairing reality may be, we go on living our lives and seeking out moments of joy or transformation. I try to approach these subjects with openness and respect, and to have my characters do the same, while being themselves.

The other thing is that from the perspective of Iranians, or those who identify with Iran's cultural and religious heritage, Iran is a place of homecoming; it's an identity to be claimed with a sense of dignity and pride. I like to shift the perspective of who gets to interpret whether something is controversial, to explore other ways of seeing, reflecting and being.

You've got a short story coming out this month, *A Death in Sarajevo*. What made you want to tell this particular story in a shorter format? Where in the timeline of Khattak and Rachel's partnership does this story fall?

I wrote *A Death in Sarajevo* because I was making a trip to the Balkans to pay my respects to the victims of the Bosnian genocide. I visited a number of cemeteries and genocide memorials in Sarajevo, Srebrenica and other places around the country. I hoped to capture something of that experience, while writing in more detail about aspects of the war that I hadn't discussed in *The Unquiet Dead*. I used the story to resolve some unanswered questions, such as what happens to the Community Policing Section after the parliamentary inquiry into Khattak's work.

The story takes place during and after the inquiry, so it falls between *The Language of Secrets* and *Among the Ruins*. Esa visits an old friend in Sarajevo on his way to Iran, and he is asked to help his friend solve a mystery related to the war.

What can readers expect from you coming up? Do you have your next Khattak and Getty novel planned out? And will you be exploring more of their stories in short stories, as you're doing with *A Death in Sarajevo*?

Yes, the next Khattak/Getty mystery has been painfully plotted out over the course of the past few months. I've been wanting to write about the Syrian refugee crisis for some time, and to examine international refugee policy, though what I really want to write about is the boundaries we create and how we determine who belongs somewhere and who doesn't. In this book I explore why we put up barriers: what informs our exclusionary rhetoric and our unwillingness to recognize the suffering of others? In *The Unquiet Dead*, I introduced Nathan Clare's sister, Audrey, who runs a women's NGO. In my latest book, Audrey has been doing intake work with refugees who've managed to flee to the Greek islands. She's suspected of involvement in the death of a refugee, and goes missing from an island camp. Esa and Rachel are asked to solve the murder and to find out whether Audrey is alive or dead.

Down the road, I may write additional short stories, but for the time being, my writing schedule is fully booked, as I'm also working on a fantasy series for Harper Voyager. (*The Bloodprint,* to be published October 2017).

In a recent interview you said that you are extra careful about discussing politics in

public, being vigilant when you attend Friday prayer, and feeling unsafe about wearing a headscarf even on your own front porch because of the current atmosphere of hate. Yet your writing is so bold and fearless. Is it hard to go from the world you write about — one that is as scary as the real world, but in which you have all the control — to being back in this world, where you have to fear speaking your mind not because you may say something wrong but because simply by existing you risk being attacked?

I have a certain amount of privilege. People can't tell I'm a Muslim woman until I choose to volunteer that information, or until I perform some action that confirms it, such as wearing a headscarf. I've lived a good part of my life in Toronto, where my identity was never stigmatized, so this fear I've learned is new. If a package comes in the mail without a return address, I consider taking it to the police. When I'm giving a talk in a certain location, I might warn my host to be on the lookout for those who display a violent antagonism to what I have to say. And that's what fear does: it skews your perceptions, it sows distrust where there wasn't any before. So I'm grateful that my books give me the opportunity to show a little courage, and to interact with audiences who shore up my faith in our better angels. There is grace and goodness everywhere, yet the angry voices get all the attention, even inside our private thoughts.

There are those who would argue that as a Muslim woman, you can't also be a feminist. We at RT strongly disagree, and we know you do as well, as seen not only in your activism, but in the female Muslim characters you've written so far, including Khattak's headstrong sister, departed wife, and close friends. Did you feel added pressure when writing these novels to make sure there were, in addition to a wide range of Muslim characters, a wide range of strong Muslim women?

Reflecting on this, I realize I didn't feel any pressure at all. The Muslim women I know are rule-the-world types, so it wasn't much of a stretch for me to put that in my books. One of the organizers of the Women's March on Washington is a Muslim woman named Linda Sarsour. My own mother is a force of nature, and the Muslim women I know run companies, they're partners at law firms, they're physicians, they teach at universities and elementary schools, they work in biomedical engineering, they write TV shows and comic books and fiction, they free the innocent from prison, they're Olympic competitors, Nobel laureates, or fiercely outspoken community advocates. So there's this perception of who people think Muslim women are versus who we actually are. It's been a source of joy for me to write characters who reflect the women around me. And who have strengths and failings like any other woman.